

A Triptych¹ of Thoughts on the Knowledge of Land

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1. Wisdom Sits in Land; Wisdom Sits in Manitoulin

In her book, *Pathways for Remembering and Recognizing Indigenous Thought in Education*, Sandra Styres writes about how conceptualizations of ‘space’ differ from conceptualizations of ‘place.’ “[S]pace is a continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied” (Styres 45) whereas place is “a particular position, point, or area in space—a linear and general perspective, particularly as it relates to time” (Styres 46). “Space, then, is an empty generality; however, place is particular, it is storied, it is experienced” (Styres 47). Such a distinction draws attention to the significance of particularity in the 2017 Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute’s (MISHI) guiding question: “does wisdom sit in places?” Instead of an abstract inquiry into relations between location and knowledge, this question called me, and all of MISHI’s participants, to engage with the wisdom that sits in Manitoulin in particular.

Moreover, according to Styres, Indigenous understandings of *Land*, or Iethi’nihsténha Ohwentsia’kékha² in Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk), go even deeper than understandings of place: “Iethi’nihsténha Ohwentsia’kékha embodies principles, philosophies, and ontologies that transcend the material construct of place. With this understanding in mind, Land *is* spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land *is* experiential; Land *is* conscious—Land *is* a fundamental living being” (47; Styres’ italics). Such understandings of Land call for more deeply developed relations with Manitoulin, likely deeper than would be possible over the one week of MISHI, though perhaps MISHI might serve as a starting place for prefiguring processes for engaging with Land, building relations with Land, and learning with Land.

One of MISHI’s great pleasures was how the rocks, waters, winds, trees and other plants, animals, etc. of Manitoulin contributed to the presentations and teachings: seeing the carved boulders of Michael Belmore’s art installation, *Replenishment*, alongside the rocky (is)landscape of Manitoulin upheld and invigorated his themes; by utilizing Manitoulin’s rock in his artwork, Belmore tells a story of land and art in mutual replenishment, beyond the art’s pictorial stories concerning fish and turtles. After Alan Corbiere and Lewis Debassige shared how the name and shape of Mindemoya serve as reminders of stories that tell of the formation and history of Mindemoya, Manitoulin, and the Great Lakes region beyond, daily drives past Mindemoya continually reminded me of where I was—the deep (spiritual) history of Manitoulin. William Fox brought to mind how we were continuing a long history of residence in the Providence Bay area of Manitoulin by bringing us to an ancient village site not far from where many of us were camping for the week, and taking us to find rocks used to make arrowheads on a beach

many of us frequented in our own time—although colonial injustices and dispossession certainly contributed to how I arrived there, now. Something particularly stands out to me about remaining with the Land even in our ‘downtime’: most nights I reflected on the days’ teachings while swimming in the waters off Providence Bay, the water’s force on me driving home the point that the land of Manitoulin cannot be separated from the waters of Lake Huron, and that I was but a small thing immersed in the interplay of the two.

For Glen Sean Coulthard,

the theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism, including Indigenous anticapitalism, is best understood as a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around *the question of land*—a struggle not only *for* land in the material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land *as system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms. (13; Coulthard’s italics)

I find that settler (academics) working to challenge settler colonialism tend to lose sight of such a theory and practice, slipping into discussing Land only as a material object, and not as an agential and spiritual “field of ‘relationships of things to each other’ (Coulthard 61)—discussing the importance of redistributing (material) land, but not looking to Land as an anticolonial agent and teacher. MISHI felt like a valuable reminder of the possibility and significance of learning about decolonization, and ethical and just relationships, from and with Land, even (or particularly) as a settler.



2. Envisioning Consensual Translation of Land's Knowledge

At the end of the week, Carolyn Podruchny gifted each of us participants with a turtle made of sweetgrass, which she had bought on the island. Carolyn mentioned that part of her reasoning for choosing turtles is their place as translators between worlds (water and land, spiritual and 'physical'; see, for instance, Basil Johnston 53), and how we, MISHI participants, are all translators by working to bridge knowledge between academia and communities, settlers and Indigenous peoples, etc. I appreciate this idea of being translators and feel it can contribute to understanding engagement with Land, especially building off ideas from Deborah McGregor's MISHI presentation, given below Dreamer's Rock.

McGregor's presentation reminded me of conversations we had in a course she taught in Fall 2016, entitled "Reshaping Research with Indigenous Peoples." In this course we addressed academic research ethics when working with Indigenous peoples and communities, but McGregor also asked us to reflect on where our personal senses of ethics and morality sit against institutional protocols for 'ethics,' and on our own personal epistemologies—our understandings of knowledge, and how/if we can know that we know something. I remember reflecting on my understanding of knowledge in McGregor's course and realizing that I do not understand ideas of 'knowledge creation': I disagree with Eurocentric ideas that universities are exceptional sites of knowledge creation, but I also do not believe that knowledge is a type of thing that can be created. When Western academics bring knowledge from Indigenous communities into academia they are not *creating* that knowledge. They are, perhaps at best, translating it from one site to another—at worst, colonially extracting it (see Linda Tuhiwai Smith). If—as McGregor promoted in her MISHI presentation—we do not center humans, and if we recognize that Land too is agential,³ then I feel that we ought to understand that Land too possesses knowledge, in which case, when is 'knowledge creation' ever not translation? Biology is translating the stories told by living beings and their parts; physics, translating the movement and interaction of physical bodies; chemistry, of chemical elements, etc.—the entities being studied always already hold the knowledge that humans take from them, and 'discovery' is just translating that knowledge so that humans may access it more readily. And aren't the theories and analyses of social sciences and humanities just ever-developing stories to explain how/why things happen in certain ways? I do not mean to diminish the significance of any of this work, but in my personal epistemology, I do not see knowledge being *created*.

McGregor's MISHI presentation got me thinking, if taking knowledge from Indigenous communities is at best translation, and at worst violent extraction, then is the same true when taking knowledge from Land? What would ethical research mean and look like with Land, as Styres describes

it? What would I need to do in order to go to Dreamer's Rock and not just extract knowledge, but get *consent* to translate knowledge (for academia)—not only consent from Whitefish River First Nation, where Dreamer's Rock sits, but from the Land itself? For Indigenous peoples, I believe that gaining consent from Land is tied in with long histories of living with particular Lands, and facilitated through ceremonies, but for a settler without these long histories of relations, and without the same place in ceremonies, how might I go about obtaining consent from Land?

In McGregor's class we discussed protocols and policies for respectfully and ethically working with Indigenous communities, including protocols based on frameworks of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC); Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) (see First Nations Centre); and "principles that express the core ethical value of respect for human dignity—Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice" (TCPS 2). Certainly these protocols and frameworks might be further developed and improved, and more might be done to ensure they are appropriately and effectively implemented, but these guidelines do exist. What would similar frameworks look like for engaging with the knowledge of Land? Protocols do exist for conducting research with animals (see *Canadian Council on Animal Care*), but I believe them to extend from the same mindset that sees land as only a material object. What might free, prior, and informed consent from Land mean and look like? And, going even further, how might Land become a collaborator in research, helping with research design, methodology, and even acting as a co-author, in a way that we can meaningfully 'know' that Land is collaborating, instead of just attaching Land's name to human work? Working to build relations with Land, based in understandings such as those described by Styres, seems like it might be a significant place to start.



3. The Voice of Manitoulin is in Anishinaabemowin

At the end of MISHI, the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation gifted us with posters which state “The Voice of the Land is in Our Language.” I have heard similar understandings shared by different Indigenous peoples, and have thought about how Western understandings of human and language development (based in Western science, anthropology, history, etc.) might tell such a story, alongside Indigenous worldviews and spirituality. Anishinaabemowin has developed as a way to communicate alongside and within the physical geography of the lands of the Anishinaabe—forests, rocky lakes, rivers, etc. What is needed to communicate in such a place differs from what is needed to communicate in, for instance, a desert. The pitch and tone of languages must respond to the things that surround them: the winds that will carry them; the rocks, waters, trees, landscapes, etc. that they will resonate with and against. Certain environs might require a loud language to speak over other sounds; other environs a quiet language to drift along; some, sounds held deep in the throat; others, sounds flicked lightly off the tongue. Anishinaabemowin has developed in intimate connection with the lands of the Anishinaabe; the voice of Manitoulin is in Anishinaabemowin.

Such an understanding raises interesting ideas regarding my questions of gaining consent to translate the knowledge of Land. If you can speak the language of a Land it is likely easier to translate that Land’s knowledge, and to ask for permission to share that knowledge. Learning the Indigenous

languages of Lands might be something to aspire to, for settlers to build meaningful, ethical, and just relations with Lands, and to find ways of living on these Lands as something other than colonial settlers. However, in immediate practice, pushing for settlers to learn Indigenous languages might reify colonial privileges, marginalizing Indigenous efforts and opportunities to learn their languages.

Much has been written on the interplay of language and worldview—how different languages express different visions of the world, and can aid in seeing the world in different ways (see, for instance, Styres, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Shawn Wilson). Throughout MISHI, Alan Corbiere repeatedly mentioned how Anishinaabemowin utilizes root ideas, and adds prefixes and suffixes to add context and create meaning for those ideas—things in isolation say little; one needs to see what things are related to, and how they are in relation, in order for their stories to come out. Even without sharing a language, taking inspiration from Anishinaabemowin and reflecting on how we are in relation with diverse aspects of Land—that we are always in relation, and are little without our relations—may help us to speak with Land, learn from its knowledge, and explore how to engage with that knowledge with respect and ethics.

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¹ A triptych is a work of art divided into three sections. Developing this post as a triptych was inspired by Michael Belmore's triptych art installation, *Replenishment*, which we visited as part of MISHI 2017.

² "Iethi'nihsténha Ohwentsia'kékha is a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) word meaning "our Mother the Earth" . . . [and] includes the sky (cosmos), the earth (urban and rural), waterways (including oceans, rivers, lakes, coastal areas; as well as reservoirs, aqueducts, culverts, and drainage basins in urban centres), humans and non-humans—near and far" (Styres 38).

³ Agency is defined in different ways, in different contexts and disciplines. In describing Land as "agential" I mean to say that elements of Land (animals, plants, waters, rocks, winds, etc.) have capacities to act with intention and purpose, and to impact the world around them. Legal/political understandings of agency may declare that while this philosophical capacity to act may be true, Land lacks agency by being excluded from dominant legal/political systems.